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F R I D A Y , A U G U S T

The History of Steroids in Bodybuilding

Periodically on the various internet bodybuilding forums someone makes a completely baseless statement about steroid use, when it started, and who was using them back in the 'old days'. When I see ignorance being masqueraded as fact I almost always feel compelled to join the discussion and refute some of the often outrageous statements being hurled about. I'm going to recap what's known about the history of anabolic steroid use in sports so I can refer people to this entry rather than go through it time and time again.

All reliable sources - publications by Terry Todd, John Fair, Randy Roach, Bill Starr, etc, as well as interviews and letters from John Ziegler, John Grimek, Bill March, etc - indicate that experimentation with testosterone for athletic purposes began in the U.S. sometime in either late 1954 or 1955. These 'trials' were short-lived, however, as the results were disappointing and testosterone use was deemed ineffective and carried the risk of harmful side-effects. A statistical analysis of Olympic-style Weightlifting performances published in the International Journal of the History of Sport concluded that Soviet athletes likely first used testosterone sometime between 1952 and 1956.

Dr. John Ziegler, physician for the U.S. Olympic Weightlifting team (i.e. the York team), described in interviews of learning about the Soviet use of testosterone injections at the 1954 World Weightlifting Championships in Vienna, Austria in October of that year. Some time after returning home, Ziegler convinced York affiliated lifters John Grimek, Jim Park and Yaz Kuzahara to be test subjects and receive testosterone injections (oral testosterone was known to be clinically ineffective by that time). By Grimek's account, the results were disappointing. In a private letter, dated at the time, Grimek spoke of seeing nothing in the way of gains and quitting the injections because he felt he was actually regressing. Jim Park received only one injection which he claimed did nothing for him physically, but made him incredibly horny. It is unclear as to Kuzahara's experience but, in any case, it was not positive enough to warrant continued use and further experimentation was ceased. In light of the terrible side effects that Ziegler had heard of and witnessed Soviet users suffering, and lack of significant results in his own test subjects, no further experimentation with testosterone was tried by the York (U.S.) Weightlifting team for the duration of the 1950s.

This was not the end of Ziegler's involvement with steroids, however. Ziegler began work with CIBA Pharmaceuticals in 1955 to develop a testosterone derivative that would carry the anabolic properties of testosterone without the undesirable side effects. Preliminary results began coming in by 1956, and Dianabol was released to the U.S. prescription drug market in 1958 for use in wasting conditions. CIBA's competitor, Searle, beat them to the market, however, and introduced Nilevar, the first synthetic anabolic/androgenic steroid, to the



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- ▶ [2010](#) (2)
- ▼ [2009](#) (8)
 - ▶ [September](#) (1)
 - ▼ [August](#) (2)
 - [The History of Steroids in Bodybuilding](#)
 - [The Seven Deadly Sets](#)
 - ▶ [July](#) (5)

prescription drug market in 1956 (used as a polio treatment).

In late 1959 (some claim as early as 1958, some as late as 1960) Ziegler decided to try the new Dianabol on some of the non-medal contending York lifters and enlisted Grimek to convince a few lifters to begin taking it under his (Ziegler's) supervision. Lower level or non-competitive lifters were chosen for the initial trials so as not to risk marring the performance of medal contenders at the upcoming 1960 Olympics (Dianabol was, at that time, a relatively untested drug and York chief Bob Hoffman was said to have feared trying it on his top lifters). Bill March, Tony Garcy, John Grimek, Ziegler himself and later Lou Riecke were the first Guinea Pigs, and the results were much more promising this time around.

From there, Dianabol use quickly spread to the entire York Weightlifting team. Now, up-and-coming York lifters and Strength and Health magazine writers such as Bill Starr and Tommy Suggs started letting the secret out to the bodybuilding community, and by the early-to-mid 1960s almost all high-level competitive bodybuilders were taking steroids in the weeks leading up to contests. This pre-contest cycling scheme by bodybuilders was based on the Weightlifters' practice of escalating steroid use in the weeks leading up to lifting meets - the logic being that just as the lifters wanted to be at their best (strongest) come meet day, bodybuilders wanted to peak at their biggest on the day of the contest. It didn't take long for steroid use to spill into the 'off-season' as well, as this allowed bodybuilders to build more ultimate muscle mass.

The man who would go on to become the first Mr. Olympia, Larry Scott, gained 8 pounds of muscle in two months between the 1960 Mr. Los Angeles (in which he placed third), and the 1960 Mr. California (which he won, defeating the two men who had placed above him in the Mr. Los Angeles two months earlier). A year earlier he had won the Mr. Idaho weighing just 152 pounds. Larry credits Rheo Blair, and his protein powder, as being instrumental in his sudden improvement. However, considering Larry's dramatic gains from that point onward, and Blair's reported possession of Nilevar a few years earlier before he even moved to California, it is quite likely that this time in 1960 also marks Larry's first usage of steroids (something to which he admits but, to my knowledge, hasn't specified the date).

But the early 1960s didn't mark the true origins of bodybuilder's regular use of steroids, however. In an early edition of his book Getting Stronger, Bill Pearl told of meeting Arthur Jones (founder of the Nautilus line of training equipment and father of the "HIT" style of training) in 1958 and learning of Nilevar from him. After a little further investigation, Pearl began a twelve-week cycle of the steroid and gained 25 pounds. At around that same time, Irvin Johnson (aka Rheo H. Blair - 'father' of the first protein powders) is said to have had Searle's Nilevar in his possession, though he isn't believed to have been widely distributing it to bodybuilders at that time.

So what can we gather from all of this? First of all, no bodybuilder or lifter was using synthetic steroids before 1956 - they didn't exist. Most likely, only the very highest level West Coast bodybuilders knew of them by 1958. From there it seems that knowledge of Nilevar and Dianabol to build muscle and strength was kept relatively in the closet until the early 1960s. After all, Hoffman did not want outside athletes to know his lifters' secrets and he was using their sudden gains via Dianabol to promote his supplement line and isometric training courses and racks. Bill Starr wrote that until he was a national calibre lifter with York in the early 1960s he had never heard of steroids. Reg Park (Mr. Universe 1951, 1958, 1965) said that the first he heard of them were in connection with rumours about East German and Soviet athletes during the 1960 Olympics, though he later heard of "steroids" being used on British POWs from Singapore in WWII as they were being nursed back to health in Australian hospitals. Chet Yorton (Mr. America 1966, Mr. Universe 1966, 1975) has said that he first heard of steroids

(Nilevar) in 1964, and decided not to risk using them - Yorton went on to become one of the sports most outspoken campaigners against steroid use and founder of the first drug-tested, natural bodybuilding federation. The condition of national and world level bodybuilders appears to have taken a visible leap between 1960 to 1964.

As for testosterone itself, Paul de Kruif's 1945 book "The Male Hormone" is often cited as "proof" that bodybuilders knew of and were using testosterone in the 1940s. But even though testosterone had been identified by researchers and isolated in laboratory settings as early as the 1930s, it didn't receive FDA approval as a prescription drug until 1950 and, therefore, injectable testosterone was produced only sporadically and in small batches for research purposes, before that time. De Kruif himself made no clear connection between testosterone use and possible athletic applications, though he did briefly raise the question if it could surpass the effects of large vitamin doses in baseball players - aside from this single sentence, his arguments were purely from the perspective of using testosterone to restore the vitality and health of hypogonadal and aging men.

It has been said that John Grimek, upon reading publications such as de Kruif's, was inquiring about testosterone in the 1940s. But he would have had nothing other than a possible hunch that it could be used for athletic purposes, and no source or opportunity to experiment with it. There were, in fact, two companies in California advertising "genuine testosterone" tablets through mail order in the late 1940s, but were ordered to stop by the FDA in early-to-mid 1951 when regulations to control the distribution of controlled substances were tightened. It was well known by researchers at that time, however, that the liver effectively clears almost all orally ingested testosterone within seconds, even very large doses (clearance rate of 24.5mg/min/kg), so these tablets would have produced no effects even if they did contain crystalline testosterone. The low bioavailability of oral testosterone is precisely why injections were used in early research and why synthetic steroids were eventually developed.

It wasn't until 1954/1955 with Ziegler, that Grimek wrote of getting his first testosterone injections. It stands to reason that if even Grimek had no access to bioavailable testosterone before 1954-55 and no knowledge of other top level bodybuilders or lifters using it before then - and as editor of Strength and Health magazine and second in command at York he certainly was in a position to know - then it is very unlikely that anyone in the west was effectively using testosterone for athletic/physique purposes before late 1954/1955. Given that these early experiments were unsuccessful and brief (likely because they knew little about dosing for increased strength and muscle mass), it is most likely that the first western bodybuilders began steroid use not with testosterone itself, but with Nilevar, sometime after 1956 to 1958. From there, Dianabol enters the picture at the elite level and by 1964 even the muscle magazines, such as Iron Man, were writing about what they called the "tissue building drugs".

For a western bodybuilder or lifter to be using testosterone before late 1954/1955 he would had to have known more about the biochemistry of testosterone and it's potential athletic effects than any western sports physician - and have had access to what was then a relatively rarely used prescription drug. He would also had to have known more about how to effectively dose it than John Ziegler, who would go on to co-develop Dianabol just a few years later. Nobody in the west can say for sure exactly when the Soviets began using testosterone, but the likely date is sometime before October 1954 and possibly as early as 1952.

As mentioned, injectable testosterone was first approved for prescription as a cancer, wasting and burn treatment in the U.S. in 1950. Before that it was available for research purposes only, with the FDA tightening regulations and enforcement in the early 1950s. Ads for "genuine testosterone tablets" were placed in national newspapers by

two California companies from 1946 to 1951, but the actual ingredients of these tablets were uncontrolled, cannot be verified, and due to the body's clearance rate oral testosterone would be inconsequential anyway. For a bodybuilder to be effectively using testosterone before 1950 he would not only had to have known more about the biochemistry, dosing and potential athletic applications of it than anybody else in the world (including the research scientists working with it), but also have had access to what was then an experimental drug, isolated in limited amounts for controlled research purposes, and not produced in quantity for a public or prescription market. "Snake oil" ads for testosterone tablets, even if they contained what was advertised (which in itself was vague), would not have significantly impacted blood testosterone levels due to the liver's massive testosterone clearance rate and cannot be considered a reliable source.


For these reasons it can be stated with near certainty that Steve Reeves, Clancy Ross, John Grimek, Jack Delinger, Reg Park, John Farbotnik, George Eiferman, etc - who all won major physique titles before the Soviets began using testosterone and before synthetic steroids were introduced in 1956 - were not using bioavailable testosterone or synthetic steroids at the time of their Mr. America, Mr. USA and Mr. Universe wins. Furthermore, it is unlikely that any major title winner was a steroid user before 1957-58 (Pearl won the Mr. USA and Mr. Universe titles in 1956 before his knowledge of Nilevar). Some athletes' careers from the era, such as Reg Park's, do span the introduction of steroids into bodybuilding. In Park's case, he weighed 226 lbs when he won the Mr. Britain title in 1949, 214 lbs when he won the Mr. Universe title in 1951, 215 lbs when he won it the second time in 1958, and 216 lbs when he placed 3rd in 1971 (at age 43 - he returned again in 1973 to place 2nd). If Park did jump on the steroid bandwagon when he learned of them in 1960, then they produced one pound of muscle in 11 years for him.

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